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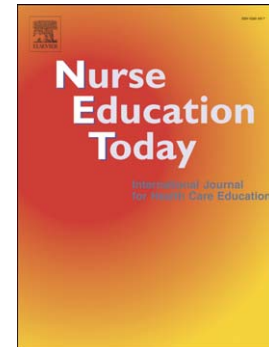
In defence of the *Viva Voce*: Eighteen Candidates' Voices

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Title Page

Title: In defence of the *Viva Voce*: Eighteen Candidates' Voices

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Abstract

Background: The doctoral *viva voce* is an under-researched field, particularly from the point of view of doctoral candidates. With increasing numbers of health care professionals undertaking doctoral study, we can develop practice by listening to their 'living voices'.

Objective: To explore doctoral candidates' experiences of their *viva*.

Design and methods: Using exploratory research and purposive sampling, eighteen participants who had undergone examination of their doctorate within the last five years were identified. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore these participants' experiences of their *viva*.

Results: Thematic analysis of the data demonstrated that: Candidates wanted to engage in academic argument but were not always provided the opportunity to do so; The *viva voce* examination was frequently an emotional experience, even for candidates who did not regard themselves as subject to such emotions, examiners were sometimes able to moderate the effect of these emotions; Practical aspects of the examination were not always considered; Issues of fairness were raised, both by successful candidates and by those who were required to resubmit.

Conclusions: The *viva voce* examination, as experienced by candidates, is not always a fair one. We recommend engagement of the academic community to promote best practice in the '*living voice*' examination.

(199 words).

Key words: *viva voce*; doctoral students; doctoral assessment; equitable assessment.

IN DEFENCE OF THE *VIVA VOCE*: EIGHTEEN CANDIDATES' VOICES.**INTRODUCTION**

An increasing number of health and social care professionals are undertaking doctoral study in a range of fields related to their professional roles. However, the examination of the doctorate has raised issues of equity and transparency. In the UK, the end of the doctoral journey is marked by an oral examination of the thesis, the *viva voce* or 'living voice' examination. Typically the doctoral candidate will defend their thesis to internal and external examiners, after the examiners have read the submitted thesis.

As doctoral supervisors we support doctoral candidates to successful completion of their theses and the defence of those theses at *viva voce*. To enhance this support, our aim was to explore the *viva voce* examination from the candidate's perspective and hence better understand the needs of the candidate for their *viva*.

BACKGROUND

The *viva voce* examination acts as a determinant of success at the end of the doctoral journey, however, the PhD viva has been described as one of the best kept secrets in higher education (Burnham, 1994). Numerous studies explore how candidates are prepared for their examination. Wellington (2010) investigated positive and negative preconceptions of the examination and there is a body of literature providing general advice to doctoral students about their preparation for oral examination: guides to dissertation writing (Brause, 2000; Murray and Moore, 2006); different preparation strategies, such as the mock viva (Hartley and Fox, 2004); discussions of examination experience and pedagogy (Rountree and Laing, 1996).

Far less attention has been paid to actual doctoral assessment. What is available raises issues of equity and ethical practice and indicates a lack of transparency in the examination (Hartley and Fox, 2004; Jackson and Tinkler, 2000; Park, 2005; Trafford, 2003; Wallace, 2003; Wallace and Marsh, 2001; Watts, 2011, Poole, 2015). The regulation and conduct of doctoral *viva voce* examinations across UK institutions has changed over time but Tinkler and Jackson (2000; 2004) identify differences between levels of advice, support and guidance provided for candidates and examiners in relation to this oral examination. Some universities provide considerable guidance, support and training for the role of examiner, but this is inconsistent across the sector. Morley, Leonard and David (2003, 68) additionally question whether the doctoral assessment has escaped the regulation of quality assurance and ‘the customer care revolution’ that has been brought to other aspects of university pedagogical practices. Morley (2004, 91) describes the UK doctoral assessment as a social practice that is ‘fraught with risks and uncertainties’ and Zuber-Skerrit and Fletcher (2007, 414) compare examination at this level to ‘Russian roulette’. In the Australian context, Mullins and Kiley (2002), Kiley and Mullins (2004) and Kiley (2009) identified differences in the marking of experienced and inexperienced examiners, further questioning the consistency of examiners’ views and practices in relation to the *viva*. As such, the *viva* is unpredictable (Rugg and Petre 2004) with its form and duration subject to the predilections of individual examiners and differences across disciplines. The issue of power of examiners, however, is not specifically explored. Recent work (Poole, 2015) identifies that since these articles were published the position has not changed.

The contemporary notion of the doctoral inquiry is to demonstrate a contribution of new knowledge to a field of enquiry, whereas assessment is often a technical process, involving rational and subjective measurement of individual attainment of pre-set attributes. The *viva* therefore sits at an interesting juncture between different educational paradigms, on the one hand within an elite tradition of knowledge verification, and on the other as an interrogation of the ‘truth’ of candidates’ claims to have produced new knowledge. This has particular implications, as the candidates’ responses to examiners can lead to failure and what the examiners might expect may be as a result of inherited disciplinary traditions. The examiners have a powerful role. However, research evidence about the UK *viva* is sparse, in part because of the exclusiveness of the process and the confidentiality of examiners’ reports.

Exploration of the *viva voce* has tended to focus on the *viva voce* as a process to be prepared for as opposed to an experience that is lived by the candidate, it is this lived experience which our research captures. The term *viva voce* or ‘living voice’ encapsulates the focus on the researcher as well as the thesis. Indeed the guidance to candidates provided by universities and the QAA emphasises that this is an opportunity for the candidate to ‘defend’ their work orally and demonstrate it is their own (QAA, 2015, p15). Crossouard (2011) reports a small phenomenological study into the student experience of the *viva* in the UK context and concludes that doctoral assessment lacks neutrality and privileges a limited affective dimension. She, and others (Leonard, 2001) suggest there is a masculinity of some academic cultures that needs to be better understood. Carter (2008) and Johnston (1997) offered insights through the lens of the examiners, investigating their practices and their comments.

The equivalent is not available through the lens of the doctoral candidate. Hence the focus of our research.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

The research project explored individual experiences of the *viva voce* examination of doctoral candidates. It aimed to identify patterns in experiences in order to develop informed and reasoned support for future doctoral candidates in their preparation for this oral examination and to promote good practice in higher education settings.

Research Design

This project is located within an interpretive paradigm, using exploratory research, and acknowledges and values the variety of ways in which individuals experience situations.

Participants

A purposive sample of eighteen participants who had experienced a *viva voce* examination within the last five years was selected. The participants had not been supervised by the authors. No other inclusion or exclusion criteria were applied. The sample was obtained through an email invitation to existing academic and professional networks accessible to the authors. Some snowballing occurred, whereby email recipients suggested other colleagues or contacts for us to invite. Thus the sample was made up of participants who responded to email contact and expressed a willingness to be interviewed. Figure 1 presents an overview of the sample.

[Figure 1 near here]

Across the sample, doctoral study had occurred in twelve different UK institutions, including older, pre-1992 and newer, post-1992 universities. The institutions are not identified, to maintain anonymity. Sixteen participants were experienced professionals in health or education settings, who had undertaken their doctoral studies as experienced professionals. Participants were aged between 24 and 56 years. One participant undertook their PhD immediately after their taught university course, one participant was an international student during their doctorate.

The outcomes of the examination were those identified by the participant. Outcomes which are similarly named are not necessarily equivalent. For example, the outcome of 'minor revisions' for some participants required insertion of one or two paragraphs of text. For another this included reworking sections of text. Some participants were required to make these amendments within three months, some within six or twelve months. The requirement for major amendments was for a more substantial reworking of material, or addition of material not in the original version of the thesis. Only one participant had been required to resubmit the thesis and also to repeat the *viva voce* examination.

Data collection and analysis

Individual, face-to-face, semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews were used, conducted in a private room in the participant's or interviewer's workplace. Interviews lasted between 20 and 70 minutes, depending upon the responses of the participants. The interviews included closed questions about the date and type of doctorate, name of university and academic discipline and outcome of the viva followed by the open question 'Tell me about your experiences of the viva itself' to enable participants to discuss their experiences and to express their understandings of their own *viva voce* examination. Prompts, such as 'tell me more about that' were

used when required. Thematic analysis, following the guidance of Braun and Clarke (2006), followed data collection. In keeping with the nature of exploratory research, coding was used to identify similarities and differences across the data.

Ethics

Ethical approval was sought from the University Research Ethics Panel and the research was carried out in accordance with the Ethical Principles of the World Medical Association (Declaration of Helsinki, 2013) for experiments involving humans.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Findings are presented in the form of the four themes arising from the analysis.

Quotes from all participants have been included but not identified in order to protect the anonymity of the participants.

Academic argument

Overall, participants enjoyed being able to present and defend their theses, even when their emotional state was highly anxious. The belief that the examiners had read their work, and in many cases appeared genuinely interested in the thesis, supported the candidate to consider that the experience was a fair one:

'In one way I loved the viva, I really had the opportunity to defend, it felt like a privilege, a contest, and I gave a good defence, I thought'.

These participants viewed the examiners as willing to listen to argument which was well founded, and able to ask searching questions which enabled the participants to provide detailed responses:

'They asked me questions, they were not there to trip me up, I ... could answer their questions, it felt like someone was listening to what I was writing about and wanting to discuss it'

The importance of knowing the work itself, and being prepared and able to present well, was stated by fourteen participants, for example:

'I knew my work thoroughly. I thought I knew what to expect, and in some ways I did. I did everything possible to prepare'.

In some cases participants stated that they did not have enough opportunity to defend their thesis, with the examiners dominating the viva, or that one of the examiners did not like their argument because it disagreed with their own.

'The questions were long and all over the place, and when I started to answer one of the examiners jumped in and told me about his work'

'It was all about them showing they were more powerful than me'

In these cases the participants did not consider that the examination had provided sufficient opportunity to defend their work and express their 'living voice'. Four participants identified issues with ethical practice. In one case, the participant's examiners had been changed in the weeks just before the examination and the new examiner wanted her work cited in the thesis. The participant considered that the work of the examiner was in a different, although allied, field, and presented her arguments, but one of the requirements for amendments to the thesis was for inclusion of the examiner's work. From the participant's perspective, power was being used inappropriately for 'self-promotion' of the examiner.

University regulations state that the thesis is expected to demonstrate: doctoral level research skills; a detailed knowledge and understanding of a particular field; contribution to the existing body of knowledge. Academic argument is the main purpose of the *viva voce* examination. This provides the opportunity for the candidate to demonstrate the work is their own, that the candidate understands the work and its relationship to the wider field, and to provide the opportunity for questions raised by the thesis to be answered by the candidate. Our data indicate that not all candidates were permitted their own voice, opportunities for defence of their work were limited for some candidates.

Emotions

Emotions as part of the examination were represented in all 18 interviews. The majority (n=14) described the importance of the event and the desire '*not to mess it up after all this time*'. Statements such as '*so much was resting on the viva*' and '*it was the culmination of so many years work*' demonstrated the significance attached to this event. This finding supports the pre-conceptions of emotion identified by Wellington (2010), which were realised for many of the participants in our study.

Several participants (n=10) identified that they did not normally get anxious in situations which others found stressful but that they did become anxious just before and at the start of their *viva voce* examination. This surprised them and it was something they had not planned for. One participant stated '*it was just not something that was on my radar, I am always calm, so I was really thrown by suddenly becoming stressed as I walked up the stairs with my supervisor to the room*'. Another participant who was very positive about her experience of the *viva voce*

examination stated that *'The viva was nerve wracking anyway'*. This finding implies that the *viva voce* itself causes undue anxiety rather than the anxiety being a feature of the individual candidate.

Only one participant stated they did not find it to be as emotional an experience as expected and linked this to experiencing three mock vivas. Even with this participant, the significance attached to success and achievement of the doctorate was great *'I am working in the field, people know me and my work, if I messed up it would have been disastrous'*.

The time lapse between the expected start time of the examination, and the actual start time, was cited as a source of anxiety. Participants stated that if they had to wait beyond the stated start time their anxiety level rose and they attributed the delay to a problem with the thesis.

For some participants (n=6) the emotion of the event was very strong, with participants describing *'I was literally shaking as I went in'* and *'as I picked up the glass of water my hand was shaking'* and *'they could see I was like a rabbit in headlights, they could see I was petrified'*. Asked why they felt such strong emotion participants identified *'the unknown'*, including in the unknown the examiners and the process. This finding concurs with that of Crossouard (2011) who identified that the *viva voce* is one of emotional labour for many candidates.

The examiners' power to affect the emotion was identified by ten participants. One participant cited the examiners having a calming effect at the start of the *viva voce* *'they were lovely, told me to take my time, very calm and kind'* and during the examination *'one examiner, he was really good at getting the best out of me, I was getting a bit agitated trying to explain, he told me it was OK to take some time to*

think'. Another participant explained that *'they did that really nice thing ... that you ask some really simple straightforward questions, you get people to settle in, they did all of that'*. Other participants identified the anxiety caused by the examiners *'I was calm and in control, but the examiner was really aggressive ...'* indicating that this made the participant anxious and unable to give of their best. This negative effect on the participant's emotions, attributed by participants to examiner behaviour, was sometimes evident from the start *'they just sat me down and started asking questions'*, and sometimes occurred later:

'I was at ease, they told me the thesis was strong, and the viva had been going well, and suddenly there was a different take and one examiner became much more aggressive ...'

Examples of specific power of the examiners within the examination were identified by several participants and linked to the emotion they experienced.

'So it was a really strange thing, on the one hand it (the viva) was what I expected, but the power and the enormous emotion of the experience was awful, it was horrible'.

'No I think it (the experience of the viva) was worse than I expected, it was the emotive element, I did not realise that the 6 years came to fruition in that moment, an hour and a half equating to 6 years is very, very powerful'.

For some participants the experience of negative emotions was particularly strong:

'It was very upsetting, and I was surprised. I did not expect the emotion, there was this power, the examiners had absolute power, I had none, the outcome, they told me first off how well I had done, so I felt very positive, and thought this is great, minor amendments at the most, and then they seemed to want more, it was so unexpected'.

A different participant offered advice for prospective doctoral candidates to '*Get tough, be thick skinned*'

For our participants, examiner behaviour was affecting their emotions within the *viva voce* and this directly affected their ability to engage effectively with the academic argument. The examiners thus appeared able to affect the outcome of the examination.

We did not specifically explore issues of gender and only one (female) participant directly mentioned the gender of the examiners, when explaining their experience and ability to make her feel more relaxed:

'They were really nice men'

The use of 'he' and 'she' for examiners was evident within other interviews but not in a way which linked the gender of the examiner to particular traits or behaviours.

Negative experiences of emotion by participants were reported in examinations where both female examiners and male examiners were appointed.

Rehearsal for the examination was important in managing emotions. This included practical matters such as understanding timings and layout. One participant stated '*I knew what to expect in terms of layout and who would be there and where they would be ...*' indicating that this helped them settle in. Others made reference to timing, that they were told they could ask for a break if needed, and would be offered a break if the examination was continuing beyond two hours. Participants emphasised the importance of rehearsing their ideas for answering a range of possible questions. All participants who had experienced a mock *viva voce* ($n = 13$) were supportive of the value of this approach in helping them to prepare their arguments and to consider

possible questions from the examiners. In assessing the value of the mock *viva* to doctoral candidates, Hartley and Fox (2004) found that 90% of their participants identified value in this practice event, supporting our findings, but they found a range of practices for conduct of the mock viva across higher education institutions.

Fairness

Participants had a considerable amount to say about fairness. Their views about fairness of conduct of the examination varied. Seven participants gave qualified statements of fairness, indicating that the process itself may not be fair but that their own examination had been fair:

‘Very fair, very fair, it did help that I had cited them a lot in my work, and I drew that into the discussion but it was ... you are supposed to do that aren’t you ...’

In this case, a specific decision to include citations was linked to the need to identify the examiners in some way in the thesis. For another participant, it was considered that luck came into it:

‘No, it was fair, I was lucky ...’

This element of chance, unrelated to the quality of the thesis, is referred to in the work of Zuber-Skerrit and Fletcher (2007, 414) who use the term ‘Russian roulette’ to refer to the element of chance in selection of suitable examiners.

Other participants (n=11) expressed their views that their own examination had not been fair, one of these had been required to make major amendments, others minor

amendments. For some, the lack of fairness was not about the lack of suitable regulations, but about the lack of understanding or application of these regulations:

'No, it was not fair, there was no right to reply to the decision. The rules were not followed in my view, the Chair did some of the speaking, the internal kept trying to put words into my mouth'

'The Chair was hopeless, fed up, tired, not interested, did not say a word. I had to say what our regs (sic) are, she seemed surprised'

The role of Chair was perceived by both these participants as an opportunity to ensure fairness, with a knowledge of the regulations and processes. However, the participants did not see this fairness operating through the role of the Chair in their own *viva voce* examinations. Many universities include a Chair as a role within the *viva voce*, the data from our study indicate that the Chair is not always effective in their role.

A second contributor to lack of fairness related to the difficulty of choosing examiners and the way in which the examiners conducted their role:

'Going back before the viva, finding the examiners. I would have liked more discussion about this, the choice of external particularly, my supervisor seemed to want a particular person, but this was not discussed with me'

'The examiners had their own agenda, and it had nothing to do with my thesis ...'

'My expectations were that it would be more fair, and more just, and it was not fair, and justice to me is that others have prepared, know the regulations, had a dialogue, reached some agreement together, there was no joined up questioning ...'

Even when the outcomes were relatively positive (pass with minor amendments) participants expressed a lack of experience of fairness in the process due to a lack of

enactment of the role of the Chair, a lack of involvement of the candidate in identification of suitable examiners, examiners not conferring before the examination to plan questions or examiners not focusing on the thesis.

Practical issues

All participants spoke about the practicalities of the *viva voce* which made a difference to their experiences. Eight participants identified aspects of the room itself, the location of the seating, the window and door, availability of water, the warmth of the room, and the place in which the supervisor was seated. Participants who commented on windows explained that the outside light was helpful in giving the room a feeling of space and a positive atmosphere. One participant described a small, hot, windowless room which gave an oppressive atmosphere from the start of the examination and made the participant feel trapped and disempowered. Participants described that they felt more comfortable when they had easy access from where they were sitting to the exit door. They also described a sense of reassurance when they were greeted, shown where to sit, provided with water and told they had time to settle themselves in before the examination began.

DISCUSSION

The findings identify key issues of transparency and equity of the *viva voce* process, supporting the writing of others over the last twenty or more years, for example Baldacchino (1995), Trafford (2003), Wellington (2010), Watts (2011) and Poole (2015). However, our findings also identify power of examiners operating across the participants' experiences within all four themes. The powerful role of the examiners

was noted from the literature prior to carrying out data collection and analysis, but there was no detail to that power. Our research has provided detail. In particular, the power of the examiners to affect the candidate's emotions during the *viva voce*, the power of examiners to facilitate a fair examination, and the power of the examiners and Chair to apply the university regulations with fairness. Our findings indicate that for many of the participants it was the candidate who was being examined rather than the thesis.

Roscigno (2011) revisits the concept of power in social relations, recognising that ideas about power are insufficiently theorised. Such a concept is applicable to the *viva voce* examination as social actors perform roles in relation to each other.

Roscigno argues that rational bureaucracy can hide histories and cultures of the social actors, thus hiding inequality. Such rational bureaucracy exists in universities in relation to doctoral examination at *viva voce*. Rules and regulations are in place which aim to ensure the fair conduct of the examination, for example the appointment of a Chair at the *viva* to ensure fair play, but despite this the legitimate power *held* by examiners is not always *enacted* in a legitimate way. The enactment of power is 'not strictly rational' (Roscigno, 2011, p352) but 'shaped by emotional connection' (p352). This was certainly evident in the data from our research, with examiners on the one hand sometimes making unreasonable requests (e.g. requiring citation of their own work) and candidates on the other hand sometimes experiencing unexpected emotions and feelings of disempowerment.

Examiners can use their positional power positively, to calm the candidate, or negatively, which heightens the anxiety experienced by the candidate. This includes increase in anxiety of the candidate through aggressive questioning by the examiners and/or dominance in the examination by an examiner. Our participants expected rigorous testing and the opportunity for academic defence, but the voice of the candidate, expected in the 'living voice' examination, was suppressed, resulting in a limited opportunity for the candidate to actively defend their work. Other examples of power within our findings include examiners' use of '*self-promotion*' and requirement to cite the examiner's own work within the thesis. Processes and knowledge of regulations by examiners and Chairs varied, so that the experience of fairness varied amongst participants. Some examiners, from the participants' perspective, wielded their power inappropriately, and there was no control for this.

This study identifies that participants reacted emotionally to their *viva voce*, partly due to their awareness of the consequences of failure, partly attributed to the examiners and the conduct of the examination. These findings in general support those of Wellington (2010). However, some participants in our study expressed their normally calm manner and their ability to manage stress and emotion and that it was a surprise to them when their normal composure abandoned them in the *viva* leaving them feeling disempowered. Our participants were mainly women (14 out of the 18 participants) but our data does not identify gendered concerns (see Crossouard, 2011). However, our findings do suggest that the preparation of the candidate needs to include the possible feeling of disempowerment and emotional reactions to the *viva voce*, both anticipated and unanticipated.

Within social relations, Roscigno (2011) theorises, power is not just about status within allocated roles, but ‘perceptions of value’ which have arisen from cultural and historical practices. This can be applied to the practices reported by participants in our study. The role of examiner carries with it the legitimate positional power to judge the thesis, but the roles of the different players (candidate, examiner, Chair) will have cultural and historical elements bound into them which may affect the distribution of power enacted in the *viva voce* and may cause power to be unfairly applied, with the examiner enacting power inappropriately and the candidate not being able to enact power. Legitimate power holders are thus able to perpetuate inequality or illegitimate systems within overtly bureaucratic rationality. Such systems require challenge.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Preparation of examiners therefore needs to be considered: what the role entails and what it does not; appropriate use of positional power; providing a platform to enable best effort by the candidate; demonstrating knowledge of the regulations. We are not suggesting that the examiners should be made less powerful but rather that their power should be used appropriately to ensure fairness and consistency across the *viva voce* examination process.

This preparation of examiners and Chair is partly the responsibility of universities. However, part of the preparation must also lie with the examiner, to provide a platform which enables the candidate to do as well as possible in the *viva voce*. In our view, there is an important part to be played by the academic community, in regulating itself through academic debate about examination processes. Some of the

examiners' behaviours described by participants in this study are not acceptable. However, there are limited mechanisms to air and challenge such behaviours in order to ensure all doctoral candidates have a fair examination.

Doctoral candidates themselves can do much to prepare for their *viva voce* examination and this can be supported by their supervisors. Our participants found that the mock *viva* formed a very useful practice, which generated some of the real emotions experienced in the *viva*, and prepared them to anticipate these emotions and consider how they might manage these emotions in the *viva voce*. The participant who had three mock examinations stated clearly that he considered he had already had a full range of possible questions which may have arisen during the actual examination and hence felt well prepared. Running mock *viva voce* examinations requires considerable time and effort on the part of academic staff however, and this requires consideration by employing institutions. In our experience it is not recognised as part of the workload of supervisors or others.

Doctoral study does not lend itself to the regulatory controls which require conformity to a single or limited range of processes and we do not advocate for this as it would limit the range and depth of development of theses at this level. There is a need, however, for greater discussion about the process, for guidance for examiners and for a means to openly discuss the *viva voce* process where the focus should be on ways to examine the content of the thesis fairly and transparently, providing every opportunity for an individual to defend a suitable thesis. Until this occurs, and until we openly explore the nature of the *viva voce* examination, we cannot claim to be awarding doctoral status with equity and fairness across universities in the UK.

We recommend further research to explore legitimate and enacted power within the *viva voce* with the aim to ensure each candidate is offered an opportunity for fair defence of their thesis.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This is a small scale exploratory study, and as such we are not claiming that the findings are generalisable. However, the data were given freely and participants wanted to talk about the examination experience, especially as the examination process is not evaluated through quality and governance processes. We were the first people to show a professional interest in their experiences. The 'living voice' needs to be heard and responded to by the academic community. Further research is required, using mixed methods approaches to gain both qualitative and quantitative data from a larger sample of participants, to enable consideration of the transferability of our findings to the general population of those experiencing a *viva voce* in the UK. The sample was, at least in part, self-selecting, so that it is possible that only those people who had experienced less positive examinations came forward to be participants in this study. The mixed responses within the interviews, with both positive and less positive experiences of the *viva voce*, indicate that participants were not exclusively those who wanted to discuss negative experiences. Even if the participants in this study are not typical, they nevertheless identify the existence of flaws in the process of examination. For this reason, we consider the issues raised in this paper to be important.

CONCLUSIONS

Opportunities to present academic argument within the *viva* were varied for the participants in this study. For at least some doctoral candidates, the experience of the *viva voce* was highly emotional, limiting their ability to perform as well as possible. Some examiners managed these emotions effectively, some examiners had a negative impact on emotions. Participants also identified a lack of fairness in the examination process. Practical issues were not always considered, where they were considered this made a positive difference to candidates' experiences.

We do not recommend tighter regulation to limit academic freedom. Rather that academics who act as examiners must consider the positional power this role carries, and use this power judiciously. Further debate is needed within the academic community about what constitutes best practice in doctoral examination and what constitutes unacceptable practice. Peer review of this process is not currently effective enough to enable the *viva voce* to be a place where all candidates are provided with the best opportunity to succeed.

(6151 words including references and abstract)

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Declaration of interest

There is no conflict of interest

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Figure 1. Demographic information.

Gender, F = female M = male	Type of doctorate	Study mode, FT = full time PT = part time	Outcome of viva voce
F = 14 M = 4	PhD = 11 Other (including professional doctorate) = 7	FT = 7 PT = 11	Pass = 1 Pass with Minor = 9 Pass with major = 7 Resit = 1

Research Highlights

- Academic argument is expected, but not always given opportunity for, during *viva voce*
- The *viva voce* can be emotional for candidates, examiners can moderate these emotions
- Practical aspects of the *viva voce* can make a difference to candidates
- Doctoral candidates are concerned about issues of fairness in the *viva voce*